

NewsRoom

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Section: Drive

Malibu spins up image, takes on Asian rivals
GM's bread-and-butter sedan quieter and more comfortable

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BURLINGTON, Vt. -- This is a typical Sunday morning breakfast discussion in my house: My husband flips through the automotive classified section of the local newspaper, pointing out that we could lease a new 2003 Chevrolet Malibu for as little as \$99 a month.

That's considerably cheaper than the nearly \$300 a month we are paying to lease a Volkswagen Jetta wagon. The extra \$200 could be used to beef up our savings account, pay off college loans or fund a much-needed weekend getaway, he argues.

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I pour the coffee and feign interest in the Malibu and my husband's endorsement, but deep inside I know that Chevrolet's bargain-basement family sedan will never end up in my garage.

When I think of Malibu, this is the image that appears in my mind: A giant black-and-white box of generic macaroni and cheese -- something else I've never purchased.

Call it foolish pride, but I have never been able to talk myself into making the move to Malibu. It has always felt too much like the automotive version of a Catholic meatless Friday -- too penitential, too basic, too boring. Pity the poor Malibu, I thought. It has suffered from the ultimate automotive put-down -- it's the perfect rental car.

So I shell out the extra \$200 a month for a tiny bit of image and excitement -- my way of rationalizing the Jetta purchase.

But my attitude has changed since I had the chance, on two occasions this summer, to spend time in the all-new five-passenger, front-wheel drive 2004 Malibu, which is now on sale.

The Malibu is built on General Motors Corp.'s terrific mid-size Epsilon platform, the same underpinning for such impressive vehicles as the Saab 9-3 and Europe's Opel Vectra.

And Malibu's sister vehicle, the Malibu Maxx hatchback, due out in December, is a bold step that may truly herald the comeback of this GM division. The old Malibu, renamed "Chevy Classic," will continue to be built for fleets only, not consumer purchase.

A performance version of the new Malibu, most likely dubbed Malibu SS, will debut around the 2006 model year with a more powerful engine and a different suspension package.

The Malibu sedan, a handsome-looking yet conservatively styled car, comes in three trim levels -- a standard model, along with LS and LT versions.

Gene Stefanyshyn, vehicle line executive for GM's midsize cars, acknowledges that Malibu borders on the plain-Jane side. He describes it as a "single button navy suit -- it never goes out of style. It's timeless."

The only thing that detracts from the new Malibu's looks is the exposed muffler that looks like it's hanging down too low when seen from behind in traffic.

The standard '04 Malibu sedan has a four-cylinder engine and starts at \$18,995, including a \$625 destination charge. The Malibu LS starts at \$20,995 and the Malibu LT begins at \$23,495. Chevrolet says a fully equipped LT will be priced at \$25,575. The LS and LT come with a standard V-6 engine.

That's quite a price bump for the base, four-cylinder '04 model, if you consider that last year's Malibu had a standard six-cylinder. The '03 Malibu, with a V-6 engine, is priced from \$18,700, including destination, and Chevy dealers are heavily discounting the car.

If you want a six-cylinder '04 Malibu, plan on spending at least \$2,000 more than that. The least expensive '04 Malibu V-6 is the \$21,000 LS.

In comparison, the mid-size Toyota Camry with optional V-6 engine starts at around \$23,000, while the Honda Accord with V-6 is even more expensive at about \$26,000. A Korean competitor, the Hyundai Sonata, starts at around \$17,000 with the optional V-6.

I drove an early preproduction prototype of the Malibu sedan in Washington, D.C., in June and a more polished version of the vehicle in mid-August, just as the first production models were starting to roll off the line in Kansas City, Kan.

My first impression in early summer was that the Malibu's interior was not as good as that of such powerhouse competitors as the Toyota Camry and Honda Accord. But by late summer, after spending a day in several Malibus, from the base model to a top-of-the-line version, I've become a convert. The interiors look good.

Granted, the base Malibu could use a bit more personality on the inside -- maybe something as simple as a touch of chrome trim here and there. But the LS and the LT models are solid, attractive offerings that should move the Chevrolet brand toward GM's ultimate goal of selling three million vehicles by 2005.

I'm not sure if the Malibu alone will make Chevrolet "cool and aspirational again," a vision of W.W. Brent Dewar, 48, Chevrolet's new general manager. But it certainly will help.

On dirt roads in hilly Vermont and on the crowded streets of Georgetown, Malibu performed well. It hugs the road and gives the driver a feeling of confidence, especially with a carload of passengers and semi-trucks whizzing by. The Chevy engineers did a good job improving the quietness in the cabin, which lends a more upscale feel to this bread-and-butter sedan.

The Malibu's base 2.2-liter DOHC I-4 engine makes 145 horsepower and generates 155 pounds-feet of torque, lagging slightly behind the power provided by the four-cylinder Camry and Accord.

The Malibu's 3.5-liter V-6 engine, which is optional on the base model, has a single overhead cam. It makes 200 horsepower and 220 pounds-feet of torque, slightly more than the Camry V-6, but significantly less power than the Accord's SOHC 3.0-liter V-6, which makes 240 horsepower.

It would be nice if the Malibu's four-cylinder engine had a bit more power and made less noise, but unless you plan to climb a lot of hills with a full load, it may not really matter. The average commuter should do just fine with the I-4.

Expect to get about 23 miles per gallon in city driving and 27 mpg on the highway with the V-6. Fuel economy will be slightly better with the four-cylinder.

The Malibu has standard electric power steering, a new feature designed to make the car more maneuverable, while giving consumers slightly better fuel economy.

Anti-lock brakes with traction control cost an extra \$400 on the base model. They are standard on LS and LT. Malibu can also be ordered with optional \$395 side curtain air bags that protect front and rear passengers.

Malibu is an easy car to live in.

The seats feel comfortable even after several hours behind the wheel and a 60/40 split folding rear seat is standard -- something that you can't even get on a competitor like the 2004 Mitsubishi Galant.

If you select the beige interior, it will be accented with wood trim; the gray interior has bright metal accents, a look copied from Japanese competitors like Nissan.

The sedan has substantial headroom and decent room in the rear for passengers. The roomy trunk on an LT V-6 model includes cargo nets built into the sides, an improvement over the hammock-style cargo nets that can get tangled and are a pain to set up.

Power adjustable pedals and manual lumbar support are standard on the LS and LT models.

The Malibu can be ordered with heated front seats, a spoiler and an unusual remote start option that lets you press a button on the key fob to start the car from inside your house or office.

One minor complaint: The digital readout on the driver information center was difficult to read in bright sunlight if you're wearing sunglasses.

As I wrapped up my latest drive in the new Malibu, I began to look forward to settling in on a Sunday morning with my husband and talking about what cars will be on our next shopping list. For the first time, Malibu will make the cut.

The affordable domestic family sedan with the familiar bow-tie is finally competitive with the best the Asians have to offer.

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